

Police Chiefs Serving Small and Rural Municipalities: Profiles and Concerns

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Key findings:

- In 2020, police chiefs in small and rural municipalities were mostly non-Hispanic white men about 52 years old, with 28 years of policing experience, about 9 years of experience as a police chief, and who earned an annual salary between \$50,000 and \$99,999.
 - Rural police departments had smaller budgets, on average, than urban departments (\$525,349 average rural budget and \$885,354 average urban budget).
 - Overall, in 2019, police departments responded to 4,319 calls for service, on average, dispatching an officer to most of these calls.
 - Small and rural police departments tended to lack adequate human resources to meet the demand for services, with an average of seven full-time sworn officers and four part-time sworn officers in 2020.
 - Rural departments were less likely than urban departments to offer mental health services to officers. Police chiefs said that officers need assurances that seeking help would not jeopardize their careers, and that the stigma associated with seeking help must be removed.
 - Chiefs reported the most pressing crime problems in their areas are illicit drugs, domestic violence, and traffic violations.
 - Chiefs reported substance abuse as the top socioeconomic (noncriminal) concern facing their communities, followed by an aging infrastructure, lack of youth services, and meeting the needs of older residents.
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Key policy considerations:

- Provide grant-writing assistance and training for rural police departments, and develop new grant opportunities specifically for small and rural police departments;
 - Provide standardized communication throughout Pennsylvania so police can communicate with other emergency service workers on one system and can access records management systems across the state;
 - Add or improve towers and repeaters to eliminate dead spots for radio coverage;
 - Assist with technology, such as broadband and computers in vehicles;
 - Reexamine civil service requirements to ensure they support recruitment and diversity in policing;
 - Reimburse departments that send a recruit through the basic academy for Act 120 certification or otherwise provide basic police academy training for Act 120 certification for all new hires across Pennsylvania;
 - Train a resiliency officer in each department as a cost-effective solution to officer mental health so that officers can access the help they need in ways in which they are comfortable doing;
 - Provide regular mental health exams for police, especially to screen for depression;
 - Provide resources for Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for police; and
 - Revisit the naloxone program to leverage court-mandated treatment after a person overdoses on opioids.
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Background

Most certified policing agencies in Pennsylvania are in small and rural municipalities serving populations of 10,000 or fewer residents. Police in these small and rural municipalities face the same issues as police in larger departments, but often with fewer resources.

The purpose of this research was to (1) create a profile of police chiefs and departments in small and rural municipalities, exploring differences across regions, comparing municipal and regional departments, and comparing rural and urban departments; (2) explore trends since a 2006 Center for Rural Pennsylvania survey of police chiefs; and (3) analyze the contemporary concerns of police chiefs.

A total of 349 (329 municipal and 20 regional) Pennsylvania police chiefs serving municipalities of 10,000 and fewer residents participated in an online survey that was open from June through September 2020.

The research team conducted follow-up, in-depth interviews with 52 municipal police chiefs from October through December 2020. Survey and interview responses were summarized. Figure 1 compares rural and urban chiefs' areas of concern for legislators.

Findings

Police chiefs in small and rural municipalities were mostly made up of non-Hispanic white men about 52 years old, with 28 years of policing experience, about nine years of experience as a police chief, and

who earned an annual salary between \$50,000 and \$99,999. Chiefs today are slightly more diverse and older, with more policing experience but less administrative experience and more education than police chiefs 15 years ago. However, this may be driven by urban chiefs, who tended to be slightly older, have more experience, and have higher levels of education than their rural counterparts.

Rural police departments had smaller budgets, on average, than urban departments (\$525,349 average rural budget and \$885,354 average urban budget).

Overall, police departments responded to 4,319 calls for service, on average, dispatching an officer to most of these calls. Rural departments tended to receive fewer calls for service than urban departments.

In addition to responding to calls for service, small and rural agencies typically provided community services, such as enforcing municipal zoning ordinances and building or property maintenance codes.

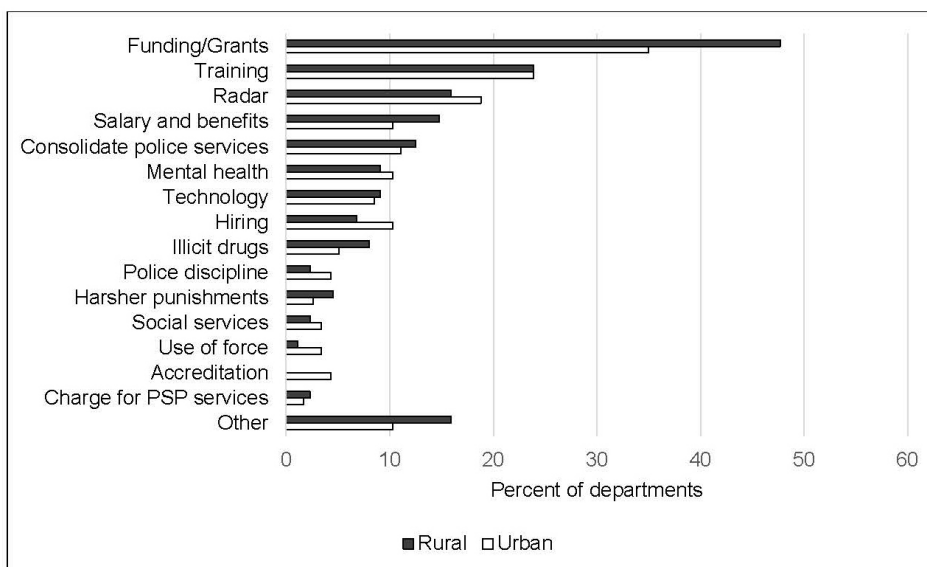
Over half of all police chiefs said they lacked adequate technology. More rural chiefs (60 percent compared to 44 percent of urban chiefs) reported they did not have enough technology. Less than one third of departments had acquired expensive body-worn cameras. Slightly more than half (53 percent) of departments had car dashboard cameras.

Small and rural police departments tended to lack adequate human resources to meet the demand for services, with an average of seven full-time sworn officers and four part-time sworn officers. Some departments were part-time only, with the chief as

the only police officer for the municipality. Unsurprisingly, regional and urban departments had more full-time officers and tended to be more diverse than municipal and rural departments, respectively.

In the prior two years, an average of about one full-time officer and about two part-time officers left and joined departments. This turnover creates an added expense for departments with small budgets; in addition to the costs of testing, hiring, and field training, departments also must pay for uniforms and equipment. Only 40 percent of chiefs believed that their departments

Figure 1. Areas of Concern of Rural and Urban Police Chiefs



were staffed adequately. Half of the responding municipal chiefs – especially rural chiefs – believed salaries were not high enough to attract new recruits to their departments. Indeed, chiefs explained that officers were leaving for higher paying positions at other departments or in the private sector.

Over half of departments had a civil service commission to oversee hiring, although urban departments were more likely than rural departments to have a civil service commission. Chiefs reported difficulty in hiring, with small numbers of applicants and fewer academy graduates.

Lack of resources also may influence officer wellness because fewer services are available to assist officers with their mental health needs. Rural departments were less likely than urban departments to offer mental health services to officers. Police chiefs also said that officers need assurances that seeking help would not jeopardize their careers, and that the stigma associated with seeking help must be removed.

Mental health is a highly publicized area of concern in the United States today. However, one-third of small and rural police departments do not have any officers with Crisis Intervention Team training. Rural areas were less likely than urban areas to offer training within the prior year on how to interact with people with mental health issues.

Chiefs reported the most pressing crime problems in their areas were illicit drugs, domestic violence, and traffic violations – similar to the top three crime

Figure 2. Comparison of Rural and Urban Police Chief Primary Crime Concerns

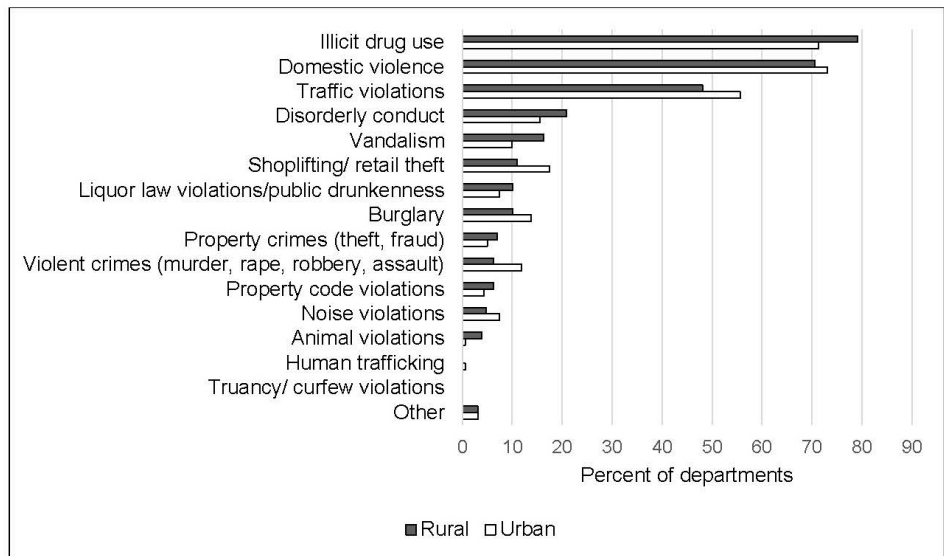
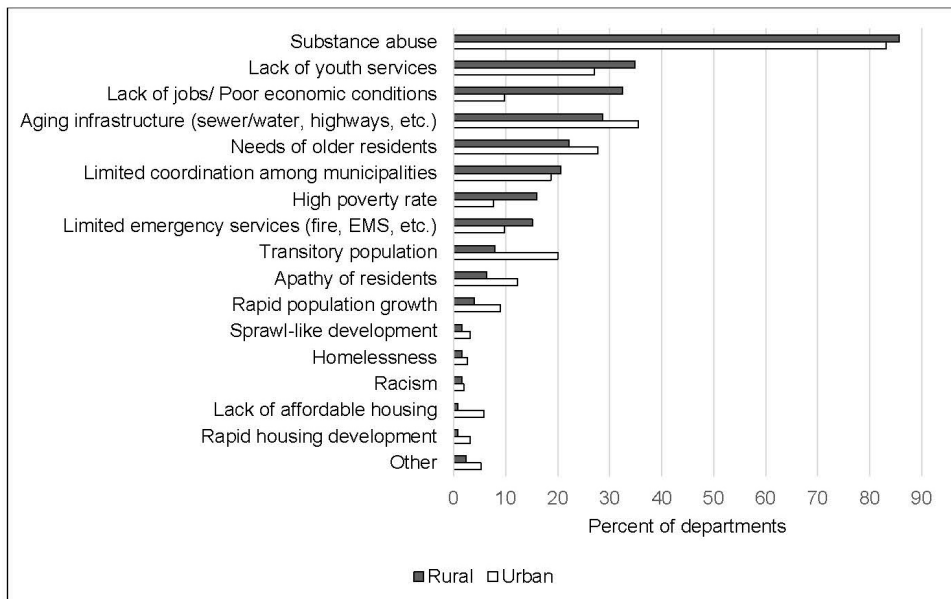


Figure 3. Top Socioeconomic Issues of Rural and Urban Police Chiefs



concerns reported by chiefs in 2005 (See Figure 2.).

Similarly, chiefs reported substance abuse was the top socioeconomic (noncriminal) concern facing their communities, followed by an aging infrastructure, lack of youth services, and meeting the needs of older residents (See Figure 3.).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (n.d.), Pennsylvania ranks fifth of all states in the rate of drug overdose deaths in 2019. To combat opioids, 80 percent of chiefs required officers to carry naloxone. However, rural departments were much less likely than urban departments to require officers to carry naloxone (69 percent rural compared with 89 percent urban). Recent research suggests that naloxone alone does not constitute a comprehensive agency response to the opioid epidemic (Lowder et al., 2020). Instead, a more comprehensive approach is needed to combat opioid abuse.

Domestic violence and traffic violations were also top crime concerns. Many chiefs said that additional social service programs (such as counseling, multi-disciplinary teams, embedding social workers in police departments, emergency housing for both victims and their pets) are needed instead of new legislation.

Police played an active role in school safety. A large majority (68 percent) of chiefs worked with the K-12 schools in their area to plan for crisis response, and other chiefs did not have a school in their jurisdiction or had schools with their own police or private security. Nevertheless, police will respond to calls from the school and, if the incident is criminal (not school policy-related), then they may arrest similar to any other call.

Pennsylvania has a high proportion of U.S. human trafficking cases (Gibbs & Priesman, 2018). However, most chiefs did not identify human trafficking as a primary concern in their areas. While 81 percent of chiefs agreed that human trafficking is a problem in Pennsylvania, they said it was not a problem in their area because they do not see it and do not receive reports about it. However, chiefs commonly recommended more training on human trafficking so police know how to identify signs of human trafficking, as well as missing and exploited children.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.). Drug overdose mortality by state. Retrieved from: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/drug_poisoning_mortality/drug_poisoning.htm.

Gibbs, J. & Priesman, E. (2018). Pennsylvania 2018 Pre-Election Poll on Policy and Governance: More than 8 out of 10 PA residents believe human trafficking is a problem in Pennsylvania. Penn State Harrisburg, School of Public Affairs, Available at: <https://harrisburg.psu.edu/public-affairs/research/research-brief>.

Lowder, E. M., Lawson, S. G., O'Donnell, D., Sights, E., & Ray, B. R. (2020). Two-year outcomes following naloxone administration by police officers or emergency medical services personnel. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 19, 1019-1040.

The research report, *Police Chiefs Serving Small and Rural Municipalities: Profiles and Concerns*, is available at www.rural.pa.gov.

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